

# Rehearsing an Emergency Plan

## at a small community water system



New Hampshire Administrative Rule Env-Ws 360.15 requires all community public water systems to have an emergency plan (plan). Creating an effective plan is a several step process. Maintaining an effective plan is a continuous process of which annual updates and plan rehearsals are integral parts. This document is intended to describe a generalized process and different methods of rehearsing an emergency plan at a small community water system. Emergency Plan rehearsals (i.e. exercises) are not required under Env-Ws 360.15. However, because an exercise is a valuable evaluation tool for your plan, DES recommends that a small water system rehearse its plan at least every year if not more often, especially if policies, procedures or contact information has changed.

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## What is an Exercise?

An exercise is a focused practice activity that places participants in a simulated situation and requires them to function in the capacity that would be expected of them in a real event. It can involve water system personnel, local officials, local fire, local law enforcement, local health officials, hospitals, Local Emergency Planning Commissions (LEPC), state agencies (i.e. DES, Health and Human Services, Bureau of Emergency Management, etc.), and federal agencies.

## Why Conduct an Exercise?

There are several reasons why systems should conduct exercises. Conducting an exercise evaluates a systems ability to execute their plan. It allows the system to identify and correct problems in the plan prior to a real event. Experience has shown that exercises are an effective means to prepare. It tests and evaluates policies and procedures and reveals weaknesses and resource gaps. It can improve coordination and communications and clarify roles and responsibilities. It also allows systems to train staff and gain support from the community. An exercise allows for training in areas that are common to all emergencies. It ensures that all response personnel are on the same page. Relationships between response teams can also be developed and strengthened.

## Types of Exercises?

There are many different types of exercises. Depending on time, money, resources and what you'd like to evaluate you can choose the type of exercise that is most appropriate.

Orientation Seminar: An overview or introduction designed to familiarize participants with roles, plans, procedures or equipment.

Drills: A coordinated and supervised activity normally used to test a single specific operation or function.

Tabletop Exercise: A facilitated analysis of an emergency situation in an informal stress free environment.

Functional Exercise: A fully simulated interactive exercise that tests the capability of an organization to respond to a simulated event.

Full-Scale Exercise: Simulates a real event as closely as possible

## Choose a Scenario to Rehearse

When a system compiles an assessment, it first identifies potential causes of emergencies. Then it develops emergency scenarios and estimates impacts for each potential cause it identifies. It makes sense for systems to consider factors such as those listed below when choosing an emergency scenario to rehearse:

1. How dire and what are the consequences? Choosing an emergency scenario that would have dire consequences for your system, like that in the above example, makes sense when deciding which scenario to practice. You want to be sure that your plan will work as intended for an emergency that could have serious consequences for your system (such as long-term or permanent loss of a source) were it to occur.
2. How likely is the emergency to occur? The reasoning here is similar to that in #1. You want to be certain that your plan will work as intended for an emergency that is likely to occur.
3. Speed of response? All emergencies necessitate a response, but some response actions must be faster than others. A drought can cause an emergency, but the response does not have to be immediate because the impact of a drought occurs well after its start, giving a system time to consider and act.
4. How extensive would notification be? Not all emergencies will require notification to all of their notification groups. For example, if a distribution line breaks from freezing as an emergency scenario. If that were to occur, they would have to notify some service/repair contractors, their impacted system users and the unique user if impacted, but they would not need to notify DES as long as it was a normal repair issue where public health was not jeopardized. If pollutants were introduced into their sources, they would have to notify all groups. When choosing an emergency scenario to rehearse, this factor is not as critical as the previous three, but still should be considered.

## Evaluation

The final aspect of an exercise is the evaluation of results. This discussion should happen right after the exercise so that it is fresh in everyone's mind. This verifies that goals were achieved, evaluates the need for improvement, and identifies necessary upgrades or corrections. Consider whether more coordination was needed and if protocols were followed. Was the exercise itself an adequate test of the systems plan? Please note this review has no right answer. The purpose of the exercise is not to solve the scenario but to meet the objectives.

## **Additional Emergency Planning Tools**

Check out the DES Water System Security website for other emergency planning and security tools including:

1. EPA Emergency Response Tabletop Exercises CD
2. Emergency Plan Guide for Community Systems
3. Sample Emergency Plan and Instructions
4. Emergency Response Notification and Procedure Card
5. EPA Response Protocol Toolbox

## **Questions?**

Johnna McKenna  
Department of Environmental Services  
Box 95  
Concord, New Hampshire 03302-0095  
603-271-7017 or [jmckenna@des.state.nh.us](mailto:jmckenna@des.state.nh.us)